DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 158 644 HE 010 334

AUTHOR Houston, H. S.; Harman, G. S.
TITLE Course Accreditation in Australian Colleges of Advanced Education: The Past, Present Practices and the Future.
PUB DATE 17 Jul 77
NOTE 29p.; Paper presented at South Pacific Association of Teacher Education 7th Annual Conference (Canberra, July 14-17, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$2.06 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Standards; *Accreditation (Institutions); Certification; *Course Evaluation; *Educational Accountability; Evaluation Criteria; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; State Standards
IDENTIFIERS *Australia; Australian Council on Awards in Advanced Education

ABSTRACT

A description of course accreditation in Australian colleges of advanced education considers the development of the present system, procedures followed at state and national levels, strengths and weaknesses of the present system, and possible future directions. A discussion of what accreditation is and what purposes it might achieve and a brief outline of two overseas accreditation systems is presented. Accreditation, as one means of quality control and improvement, concentrates on courses rather than institutions. Both government and professional associations run their own accreditation systems. Two overseas models used by the Council for National Academic Awards in the United Kingdom and the National Commission on Accrediting in the United States did not fit Australian needs. The organization and responsibilities of the Australian Council on Awards in Advanced Education are outlined. Steps in applying for course accreditation are described. It is suggested that the present system be continued and improved and that a comprehensive review of the system be conducted at the national, state, and institutional levels by an independent authority. Improvements could be made regarding the composition and tenure of assessment committees and in the briefing provided by agencies to committees. (SW)

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South Pacific Association of Teacher Education

7th Annual Conference

14-17 July 1977

Canberra

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Course Accreditation in Australian Colleges of Advanced Education: The Past, Present Practices and the Future

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

by

H.S. Houston

Tertiary Education Commission

and

G.S. Harman

Australian National University

Note: This paper was prepared before Dr Houston took up his post as Chairman of the Advanced Education Council of the Tertiary Education Commission

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Introduction

This paper is based on a belief that a review of the aims and operation of the present system of course accreditation in Australian colleges of advanced education is highly desirable.

The current system of course accreditation in colleges of advanced education is now well established. It was developed largely on the basis of recommendations made in 1969 by the Wiltshire Committee, a three-man committee of inquiry headed by Mr F.M. Wiltshire and appointed by the Federal Government to inquire into and report on matters relating to academic awards in advanced education. Now in each state and the A.C.T. there are well established procedures for course approval and review, controlled by government agencies, while at the national level there is an Australian Council on Awards in Advanced Education, responsible to both state and federal ministers of education. By February 1977 well over 1,000 courses and awards had been nationally registered with the Council (ACAAE Bulletin No. 12). Yet to date there has been no thorough and public review of how effective the current machinery is in achieving the objectives originally set for it, and how appropriate to present conditions are the various procedures and arrangements. Such a review would seem desirable, particularly as the college of advanced education system has developed considerably since the present machinery was designed.

But apart from this, course accreditation has been the subject of various criticisms and complaints from academic staff and administrators in colleges. Indeed, the strongest and most vocal criticisms of present administrative arrangements, particularly at state level, relate to accreditation. In particular, college academics complain of a heavy burden in time and effort placed on them in preparing course accreditation documentation, of long delays in getting new courses approved, and of the fact that in universities and TAFE similar systems do not operate. Many of them also suggest various desired modifications to current procedures. These complaints and criticisms raise important questions that demand attention. Are the criticisms of college academics justified? Which procedures could well be modified? Is there a need for a similar system in the university and TAFE sectors?

Further, a review of the course accreditation system seems desirable at a time when both federal and state authorities have

appointed committees to review higher education, and when there is a great deal of current discussion about rationalisation and restructuring.

This paper seeks to provide background information on the present system of CAE course accreditation, and to raise for discussion a number of issues and options. More specifically it aims to

a) trace the development of the present system of course accreditation, and to note why it developed;
b) explain briefly the present accreditation procedures followed at state and national levels;
c) assess the strengths and weaknesses of the present system; and
d) consider some possible directions in accreditation procedures for the future.

A key line of argument is that on balance course accreditation has worked decidedly to the advantage of the CAE system, but that certain weaknesses need attention and in a number of respects the administrative arrangements could be strengthened or modified.

The body of the paper is organised as follows. First, there is a discussion of what accreditation is and what purposes it might achieve. This is followed by a brief outline of two overseas accreditation systems, both of which were considered by the Wiltshire Committee. Sections are then devoted to the development of the present system and how it operates, to the advantages and weaknesses of the present system, and to suggestions for future directions.

What is Accreditation?

In everyday language the words accredit and accreditation are employed in a number of senses. For example, the term accredit is frequently used to refer to the furnishing of an envoy with credentials, or to the setting forth of some view as being credible or authorised.

In the language of higher education, however, accreditation has a more precise and restricted meaning. It is used simply to mean the recognition afforded to an institution (such as a university or college), a faculty or division, or a course or programme which meets some minimum standard or criteria demanded or set by a competent and recognised agency or association.

Accreditation is essentially a device of quality control and quality improvement. Its basic aim is to promote and ensure high quality in particular academic programmes, and also at times to improve quality.

Generally its purpose is to afford protection to particular groups - to institutions (against other institutions offering poorer quality programmes of the same kind), to students (against institutions and courses of poor quality), to employers (who wish to know that prospective professional and sub-professional employees have been competently trained and to know what various credentials mean), and to professional associations (who wish to ensure that only properly trained personnel enter particular professions). But at the same time, accreditation can achieve or help achieve other goals. For instance, it sometimes is a valuable device to enable a small and new college to get detailed, expert advice on particular course proposals. Or again, institutions or faculties sometimes use the threat of loss of accreditation as a lever to press for additional resources. Still again, many accreditation systems operate in such a way as to standardise the usage of certain terms, such as degree or diploma, and the nomenclature used for particular kinds of qualifications.

Accreditation systems generally have clearly defined procedures. Special documents are prepared within the institution seeking accreditation, assessors visit for discussions with academic staff and administrators, and possibly students, and to view resources such as laboratories and libraries, and formal reports are prepared. Generally the results are published or made widely known.

Most accreditation systems are of fairly recent origin. Almost without exception, they owe their existence to the rapid development in higher education over the past two or three decades, and to the transition from small, elite systems of higher education to diversified, mass systems. Generally mass diversified systems face particular problems with regard to varying quality of programmes and to the worth of the various awards given. This problem has often been most marked in non-university sectors of such systems, since institutions in such sectors usually lack many of the informal controls and constraints imposed by tradition and other factors on new universities. Consequently, in a number of societies, including Australia and the U.K., government-controlled accreditation systems operate only in non-university sectors of tertiary education.

Accreditation systems may take many forms. Some are operated by government agencies, while others are run by voluntary organisations.

Some concentrate on courses or broad areas of study, while others accredit a whole college or university. Some operate within a single sector of a higher education system, while others operate across two or more sectors.

Within Australian higher education, there are two main forms of accreditation, and both concentrate on courses rather than institutions. First, there is the system of course accreditation in colleges of advanced education which is run by government agencies. This is the subject of this paper, and so no more detail will be given at this stage. However, it should be pointed out that this system is different from procedures with regard to course approval for funding within the CAE sector. For a number of years the Federal government's main co-ordinating agency for colleges of advanced education (from 1972 until recently the Commission on Advanced Education, and now the Tertiary Education Commission) has had powers of course approval for funding, derived from state grants acts. But these powers and the process of approving new courses for funding are separate from course accreditation, though in many cases at state level both are handled by the same government agencies.

Second, various professional associations (e.g. Institution of Engineers, Australia; Australian Institute of Physics; Royal Australian Institute of Chemistry; Institute of Mining and Metallurgy) run their own accreditation systems, and in many cases these operate in both university and CAE sectors. Basically these systems are concerned to give recognition to particular courses which, on the basis of their length, standards of entry, course content and quality of their teaching staff, are considered to provide a basic minimum standard for entry to a profession. In the case of well established professions, such as engineering, if recognition is not given to a particular course, or if recognition is withdrawn, this has very serious consequences for a college or university and students in the particular course (Graycar, 1975a, p.123). Many of these accreditation systems operate in a similar fashion to the official course accreditation system for CAEs. On receipt of an application from an institution for accreditation, arrangements are made for a committee of persons drawn from universities, CAEs, industry and sometimes private practice (often they include persons who also serve on accreditation committees of state

co-ordinating agencies for CAEs) to visit the campus. These committees are variously termed - boards of examiners, education committees, accreditation committees, qualifications committees. In the case of the Institute of Physics, an accreditation committee usually has three or four members. Before a visit to a campus each member is provided with syllabus details, copies of previous final year examination papers, and details on the formal qualifications, experience and publications of academic staff. Visits usually take one day. At the campus the committee meets with academic staff, inspects laboratories and equipment, and looks through examples of students' practical assignments and marked examination papers. A report is prepared and this recommends whether the particular course should be recognised as constituting the minimum qualification for membership, or be recognised at all. Reports frequently comment on aspects of the syllabus or on the quality of facilities, and sometimes make particular recommendations for future action by the college or university.

This system of accreditation by professional associations to date has received little outside scrutiny, but clearly there are important questions that should be asked. For example, does this system give too much power over the organisation of particular courses in universities and CAEs to professional associations? Is the influence of professional associations on curricula a desirable one? Is there sometimes a problem with dual systems of accreditation (i.e. government and professional association) for particular professional fields in CAEs? We are not in a position at present to attempt to provide adequate answers to these questions, but on the basis of overseas studies and the little work done here there seems good reason for concern. Obviously the interests of professional associations do not always coincide with those of professional schools in universities and CAEs, nor with those of students wishing to enter particular professions and of the public. Above all else most professional associations understandably seek to achieve high exclusive status for their members, to control entry to the profession, to foster professional ethos, and to secure higher incomes and other benefits for members. Overseas studies demonstrate that professional associations often tend to exert a powerful influence for maintaining the <u>status quo</u> with regard to entry to university professional schools, particularly in fields such as medicine and law. They also tend to reinforce a strongly conservative

'how-to-do-it' tradition with regard to curricula (e.g. Applied Research Associates, 1971(a); Applied Research Associates, 1971(b)). In Ontario a research study prepared in 1971 for the Commission on Post-Secondary Education (Applied Research Associates, 1971(a), pp. 92-93) suggested that power over curricula in university professional schools should be shifted largely from the professional associations to government, perhaps to a special Department for the Professions. In a somewhat similar fashion the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education in the United States recommended with regard to community colleges:

> There should be a single program of institutional accreditation for two-year colleges, and the accreditation of specialties should be eliminated.
>
> The contribution of professional associations in the evaluation of specialised programs should be made through co-operation with regional accrediting bodies (Digest of Reports, 1974, p.312).

Studies in Australia by Graycar (1975a; 1975b) indicate that the Institution of Engineers, Australia, is seen by engineering academics to have a major influence on university and CAE engineering schools. A considerable proportion of the sample of academics interviewed (about 50 per cent) said they considered that this influence was undesirable, and that it unnecessarily restricted the freedom of a university or college engineering school to innovate and make curricula decisions on educational grounds. Significantly, nearly all these people were members of the Institution of Engineers. One full professor told the interviewer:

> There is a definite restriction on our autonomy ... Most members of the staff think the course is O.K. but the Institution of Engineers says it is too short, and because of the status that attaches to Institution of Engineers accreditation, there will be a course revision here .... (Graycar, 1975a, p.124).

Similarly a lecturer said:

> The Institution of Engineers has a terrible influence; they have caused us to change courses quite dramatically. They lay down the number of class contact hours - we are forced to teach only in certain areas - we can't put into our courses what we want to - what we think is best (Graycar, 1975a, p.124).

And apart from this evidence, it is well known that in 1967 the Institution of Engineers unilaterally decided and announced that from 1980 only those students who followed an approved four-year course would be accepted into membership. This raises the crucial issue of

whether a professional body alone should have the right to determine that professional courses in universities or colleges should be lengthened or have their content significantly modified. With respect to the 1967 decision of the Institution of Engineers, the Commission on Advanced Education requested Dr C. Selby Smith to report on the cost of lengthening engineering courses in colleges. He reported in 1971:

> ... the additional financial costs of lengthening these courses will be substantial - certainly involving hundreds of thousands of dollars and probably millions ... An extra $1.25m. for one thousand graduates seems likely though costs could well be higher. Furthermore, since these costs are at 1969 prices, future outlays in money terms will be substantially greater ... (ACAE, Third Report, 1972, pp.92-93).

One final point needs to be made here. Accreditation is simply one means of quality control and improvement. Other mechanisms include systems of external examiners; peer review within institutions; research on teaching and the improvement of teaching; courses for new lecturers; provision of consultants to work with lecturers on teaching and assessment problems; provision of additional teaching materials; and various incentive systems to reward good or innovative individual teaching or whole teaching programmes. Within any system it seems sensible that a combination of mechanisms be employed, rather than to rely on one mechanism alone.

Two Overseas Models

The Wiltshire Committee examined two overseas models of national accreditation bodies - the Council for National Academic Awards in the United Kingdom, and the National Commission on Accrediting in the United States - but rejected both on the grounds that they did not fit Australian needs, and the particular pattern of distribution of power between federal and state governments (Wiltshire, 1969, p.42).

We would contend, however, that overseas accreditation systems, particularly those in the U.K. and U.S. can provide useful insights relevant to current Australian problems. Here space forbids use to more than briefly describe some of the key features of the accreditation system for polytechnics and similar non-university institutions operated in the U.K. by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA), and the general organisation of accreditation for higher education in the United States.

The CNAA was founded in 1964 by Royal Charter on the recommendations of the Robbins' Committee to replace the former National Council for Technological Awards. Its charter gives it authority to award degrees and other academic distinctions to students who satisfactorily complete courses approved by the Council in further education institutions which do not have the power to award their own degrees. In September 1974 the CNAA merged with the National Council for Diplomas in Art and Design and now awards degrees in art and design, as well as in many other fields (Directory, 1975, p.5).

By terms of its charter the Council's degrees are required to be comparable in standard to those awarded by universities in the U.K. However, the emphasis of a CNAA degree course often differs from that of its university equivalent. Practical competence is highly valued, as is the amount of teaching and guidance given to students. The CNAA degrees include bachelors degrees (B.A., B.Ed.. B.Sc., unclassified, or with the appropriate honours classification), higher degrees by course work and dissertation (M.A., M.Sc., or M.Ed.), higher degrees by research (M.Phil. and Ph.D.) and higher doctorates (D.Sc., D.Tech. and D.Litt.) (Kerr, 1975, p.24). The courses leading to awards may be full-time or part-time. By 1975 there were over one hundred institutions offering some 900 courses validated by the CNAA, with more than 62,000 students registered in these courses (Directory, 1975, p.6).

The Council not only has the power to award degrees and other distinctions, but also to approve courses of study for these and conditions relating to courses. However, it does not have powers relating to the distribution of courses between particular institutions, nor is it involved in financial allocations in advising any other body on the making of such allocations.

The CNAA's powers are exercised through a three-level structure, consisting of the Council itself (comprising a Chairman and 25 members), its five major committees (namely those for Arts and Social Studies; Education; Science and Technology; Research Degrees; and Art and Design), and through a large number of subject boards, which are responsible to the appropriate one of the above five committees. In total there are some 1,300 people involved in the membership of the above three-level structure. These people are drawn from colleges and polytechnics (50 per cent), universities (25 per cent), and industry, commerce and the professional bodies (25 per cent). The members of Council are appointed by government, but the Council appoints its

committees which in turn appoint members of subject boards and panels. Colleges and polytechnics are invited to make nominations to subject boards and panels. Travel expenses for members of committees and subject boards are paid by the Council, but no other fees are paid (Kerr, 1975, p.24).

Although the CNAA grants the qualifications and thus guarantees the standard of courses, the colleges and polytechnics themselves design the courses (Pratt and Burgess, 1974, p.105). At the request of an institution, the CNAA will set in process its machinery of course review and validation. The appropriate subject board will first discuss the course and then appoint a visiting group (from 8 to 30 members) from amongst its membership to visit the college and to discuss the proposal in detail with staff. According to the Council's current chairman,

> ... the system is essentially one of judging the appropriateness of the staff to teach the course which they themselves have designed and of assessing whether that course could reach a sufficiently high standard to be judged comparable to that of a university course (Kerr, 1975, pp.24-25).

The CNAA has rather detailed regulations relating to accreditation; these refer to matters such as the titles of CNAA awards, the minimum entrance requirements to courses, the duration of courses, and assessment and examinations. But although they are detailed, CNAA authorities claim these regulations 'are in fact very flexible and ... a college proposing a course has got very considerable scope for self-selecting a sub-set of these regulations and relating that sub-set to its proposed course' (Kerr, 1975, p.4). Courses are approved only for a specific time at the end of which they become due for reapproval. Sometimes courses are conditionally approved; if the condition has financial implications it is a matter for the funding agencies to consider, not the CNAA. Subject boards must also approve the appointment of external examiners and maintain general oversight over approved courses.

While an individual institution has a major role in setting in process the accreditation procedure, each course submitted to the CNAA must first obtain the approval of the Department of Education and Science (or the Scottish or Northern Ireland education departments) which, with the help of a Regional Advisory Council, assesses viability in terms of student demand, the development of the institution and its resources, and national economic and educational needs. This judgement is not

essentially concerned with the academic merit of the course.

In the United States accreditation operates in a very different manner. First, it covers all types of higher education institutions, and not just non-university sectors. Second, accreditation is in the hands of numerous voluntary accrediting associations, some regional and others nation-wide. Many of these associations which have no legal powers over educational institutions are members of the National Commission on Accrediting. This is a co-ordinating and supervisory body, which recognises accrediting agencies; it does not directly accredit any university or college. It was formed in 1949 as a time when it was felt that the ever-increasing number of accrediting agencies - some competing with others in the same fields - was subjecting colleges and universities to conflicting demands and unnecessary expense (Wiltshire, 1969, p.71).

The various regional and nation-wide accrediting agencies promulgate criteria for standards of institutional or programme quality, and admit to membership only those that meet these criteria. The only power which the accrediting organisations have is that of giving publicity to the criteria and to the lists of institutions accredited. Inclusion on the approved list of a nationally recognised accrediting organisation is generally accepted as a significant indication of institutional quality.

In many respects the accreditation process works in a similar fashion to that of the CNAA. Teams of experts visit institutions wishing to gain accreditation, and talk with academics and administrators and inspect libraries, laboratories, etc. Accredited institutions have to be revisited and re-accredited periodically. However, in the United States more emphasis is placed on the standards by which quality will be judged (often these are quantified e.g. a library of so many volumes), and there is no general continuing oversight of accredited programmes provided by accrediting agencies. Also in general institutions receive less help than in the U.K. system to improve proposed courses.

Development and Operation of the Current System

The development of a binary system in tertiary education in Australia in the mid-sixties was accompanied by prospects of a proliferation of institutions, an expansion of types and levels of courses and a substantial increase in the number, quality and kind of degree and diplomas awards. In many of the earlier commentaries on

binary-ism, there were signs of anxiety regarding the emergence and expansion of colleges of advanced education and the consequent effects on the universities. The colleges were described likely to be 'as expansive and as elaborate as the universities' (Murray Smith, 1971); opportunities for research and development in the universities were believed likely to be '... arrested by the proliferation of a multitude of costly tertiary institutions' (Cowen, 1969); and of the students who were to study at the colleges, it was argued 'some will be as able as those going to universities, many will not' (Williams, 1969). There were arguments, too, against the awarding of degrees in 'the other half'. But all these arguments notwithstanding, the widening of the scope of tertiary education was favourably viewed by the Commonwealth Government of the time. 'Equal but different' became something of a political shibboleth and support through modest federal funding ($48 million) for 1967-1969 set the advanced education sector on an irretrievable road to continuing development.

As early as 1966, Senator Gorton had indicated that the purpose of the colleges was '... to provide to the community, graduates with professional qualifications with a strong bias towards the application of qualifications to immediately practical ends ...' (Gorton, 1966). There was no explicit mention of degrees, diplomas or other levels or types of awards which colleges of advanced education would be able to confer. But from the discussions and debates which ensued, it is clear that it was assumed that distinctiveness of both the universities and the colleges of advanced education would be maintained. Distinctions were drawn, for example, between universities' students with analytical minds and colleges' students with applied minds (Richardson, 1971); between academically-oriented (university) students and career-oriented (college) students (Allen, 1969); between teaching styles in the universities and colleges (Partridge, 1965) and course-oriented colleges (Wark Report, 1966). And underlying the arguments for the maintenance of these were two beliefs: first, that no diminution of resources allocated to the universities would be effected; second, that an equal-but-different distinction could be readily established and maintained.

By 1968, forty-three institutions, designated as colleges of advanced education, were receiving Commonwealth financial assistance. Enrolments were increasing rapidly and it seemed likely that soon other institutions would enter the CAE sector. Two colleges already were

offering bachelors degrees (the South Australian Institute of Technology and the Victorian College of Pharmacy), while others were keen to establish new degree programmes. Across the college system nationally a tremendous variety of awards were being offered. These awards used the terms 'Diploma', 'Associate Diploma', 'Associateship', 'Associateship Diploma', 'Fellowship Diploma', 'Diploma in Technology', 'Diploma in Licentiateship' and 'Advanced Certificate'; in all some twelve different terms were in use for a first award alone.

Understandably there was considerable concern. both in government and some of the colleges, about this situation. Sir Ian Wark has described how the Commonwealth Government came to take action:

> The forty-three different colleges of the day, left to their own devices, could have adopted widely differing standards for their awards. Some form of accreditation was needed, first, to protect the well-established colleges from currency depreciation in awards, and second, to confer authenticity on the awards of the lesser-knowns. On the recommendation of the CACAE, the Commonwealth Government, with the agreement of the states, in 1968, set up a Committee of Inquiry into Awards and Standards in Colleges of Advanced Education, headed by Mr F.M. Wiltshire (Wark, forthcoming, p.162).

The Wiltshire Committee was asked to make recommendations on the desirability of conformity in nomenclature for awards, on criteria which should be applied in the assessment of courses for awards at various levels, on the nomenclature to be used for awards, and on the possible structure for a national body to advise on comparability of standards in awards. It soon decided against any rigid conformity in courses, but in favour of a nationally recognised and consistent system of nomenclature of awards (which is hoped would help establish the CAE system 'in the minds of employers, professional bodies and the community generally') (Wiltshire, 1969, p.24). On the basis of the amount of knowledge imparted, depth of study, level of attainment, and stage reached on completion of course, it classified all existing CAE courses into four broad categories:

a) three year full-time (or part-time equivalent) courses in vocational disciplines to normal professional level;

b) two year, or three year, less-demanding courses;

c) one year higher study courses to extend a first course in advanced education, open to graduates of both colleges of advanced education and universities; and

d) one or two year more demanding higher study courses following a three or four year advanced education course, or a university degree.

Recognising the need to maintain flexibility, it recommended the use of the term 'degree' to demonstrate the academic quality of courses vis-a-vis counterpart university courses accorded degree nomenclature, and that the term 'diploma' be used to cover awards at levels from the (sub-professional) technician level to the 'postgraduate' in the conventional sense of the term. In advancing its recommendations, Wiltshire and his Committee were clearly mindful of requirements for:

a) a style of nomenclature distinctive from that used by universities;

b) a system of nomenclature acceptable and understandable across the Australian states and the Australian Capital Territory; and

c) the establishment of procedures through which awards would be nationally accredited.

To help achieve national accreditation of awards, it recommended that 'a national body designated the Australian Council for Accreditation of Awards in Advanced Education be set up to accredit awards in Advanced Education' (Wiltshire, 1969, p.43).

Following publication of this report in June 1969, the federal Minister for Education conferred with the six state education ministers. After protracted negotiations and after the Commonwealth agreed to bear the financial costs associated with a national body, agreement was reached and in December 1971 the Australian Council on Awards in Advanced Education (ACAAE) was set up, jointly by the Commonwealth and states for a trial period of three years; in 1974 it was agreed to continue with this arrangement for a further three years until another review was held.

Through consultation with and advice to state and Commonwealth agencies, the ACAAE has responsibility to

a) seek to promote consistency in the nomenclature used for awards in advanced education; and

b) assist in the development of meaningful relationships between courses and their associated awards (ACAAE, Fourth Report, 1976, p.vii).

Its main task is to maintain and publish a national register of awards in advanced education. At the request of the appropriate state authority (or Commonwealth authority in the case of institutions in federal territories), proposals for registration of particular courses are considered. Proposals must certify that a course has been assessed and accredited. The Council does not have the right to refuse registration, although it may refer back any proposal for further consideration by the state agency concerned. If, after such reconsideration, the agency affirms its accreditation, the Council is required to 'enter the award in the Register' (ACAAE Fourth Report, 1976, p.viii). Once an award is registered, a Certificate of National Registration is issued to the college concerned. But as well as having these responsibilities, the ACAAE is required to liaise with state agencies and has the power to issue guidelines.

The ACAAE comprises two Federal Government nominees, two persons nominated by each state minister of education, and an independent non-educator chairman, acceptable to all ministers. From the start, most members of the Council have been full-time chairmen or part-time members of state and territorial agencies responsible for accreditation in advanced education (in 1975 at least eleven out of fourteen members came into this category). Thus it is not surprising that the ACAAE has not taken an independent stance from that of state agencies on various issues. The Council does not have its own secretariat; instead it is serviced by officers of the Commonwealth Department of Education.

For the purpose of registering awards, the ACAAE has categorised courses in advanced education under five levels of award as follows:

UG 1 Bachelors degree
UG 2 Diploma
UG 3 Associate Diploma
PG 1 Graduate Diploma
PG 2 Masters degree

Its guidelines specify the desired designations for each of these. It cannot refuse registration to awards whose designations differ, but it encourages state bodies to adopt its pattern; by 1974, 91 per cent of awards registered in that year conformed to ACAAE designations (ACAAE, Fourth Report, 1976, p.2). Awards are registered for a maximum period of five years, after which a further application must be made. A small number of awards have been registered in colleges not recognised

by the Commonwealth as colleges of advanced education for funding purposes. Unlike the CNAA, the ACAAE does not provide in its national register for recognition of any honours degree (ACAAE, Statement No. 2, 1973).

The main burden of the accreditation process is carried by state and territorial agencies, and their various committees and boards. In each state except Victoria, there is a single recognised statutory authority responsible for accreditation in CAEs; in Victoria, there are two authorities, the Victoria Institute of Colleges Council, and the Senate of the State College of Victoria, while for the A.C.T. the Commonwealth Government has established the Australian Territories Accreditation Committee for Advanced Education. The internal structure of these agencies varies considerably. Most have a three-tier arrangement of governing council, board or committee; a standing committee (variously named e.g. Courses Development Committee in N.S.W., Education Committee in Queensland, Accreditation Committee in Western Australia); and assessment committees (variously named e.g. Course Assessment Committees in Queensland and New South Wales, Course Development Committees in the VIC system, and Invesigating Panels in Western Australia). However, in South Australia and the A.C.T. the structure is two-tier and assessment committees report directly to the agency's governing body.

In each state and the A.C.T. course accreditation is a multi-stage process. Generally a college wishing to have a new course accreditated applies in a prescribed manner to its relevant agency. Often at this stage the submission is brief, including only the name of the proposed award, the objectives of the course, its proposed duration, and details on the composition of any special advisory committee involved in the course's development. This request is then considered and if the agency supports the proposal in principle a detailed submission is requested. This is prepared by academic staff in the college, and can involve many hours of work. After the submission has been received by the agency, arrangements are made for the review and accreditation procedure to proceed. The actual procedures followed vary from agency to agency, but generally the essential pattern is as follows. After study of the submission and supporting documents, an assessment committee visits the college, discussing the proposed course with academic staff and administrators, and inspecting facilities. A report is then prepared and submitted. In South Australia and the A.C.T., as we have noted, this is considered immediately by the accrediting agency, while elsewhere reports are first considered by a

standing committee. Further advice may be sought from the college or some other authority, and in some cases the submission is referred back to the college for review and modification. Application for national registration may be made to the ACAAE once accreditation of a course and its award have been approved.

Assessment

Most institutional arrangements exhibit some weaknesses as well as strengths. Certainly this is the case with the current course accreditation system for CAEs. For convenience we will discuss strengths and weaknesses separately.

(a) Strengths

While there are many limitations in the process of accreditation as currently practised, there is no doubt that the accreditation and registration of awards has contributed significantly to the credibility and strength of advanced education in Australia. The establishment of the Australian Council on Awards in Advanced Education has come some distance towards realising goals enshrined in the report of the Wiltshire Committee. In particular, the establishment of a national register and the attempt to rationalise categories of awards are positive accomplishments. Accreditation also has provided distinct payoffs to individual colleges and their staffs. Colleges which undergo the rigour of preparing an accreditation document, having it approved by the state co-ordinating authority and registered by ACAAE have the assurance that their programme is nationally credible and creditworthy. The close and critical scrutiny from colleagues in other colleges and universities, as well as from employer groups, provides the necessary safeguards for the emergent advanced education sector still struggling to find its place in the sun. Awards, once accredited, have a maximum 'currency value' of five years - a further guarantee which helps ensure relevance and validity. Accreditation can be particularly beneficial for the newer and smaller institution; among other things, it often provides one quite effective means of securing expert assistance in the detailed planning of new courses and the review of course proposals.

Despite frequent criticisms of the current accreditation system by college academic staff and administrators, there is good evidence to believe that within advanced education the benefits of accreditation

are widely appreciated. The Australian Conference of Principals of Colleges of Advanced Education has stated recently that in its view accreditation 'has been of benefit to the advanced education sector' (ACPCAE, 1977). Moreover, data from the Regional Colleges Project (Harman, 1975, pp. 425-433) demonstrate strong support for the principles of accreditation, though not necessarily the detailed procedures, from among both college principals and academics. Using a structured interview schedule, a sample of 19 metropolitan and regional CAE principals or directors were asked about accreditation. One item was phased in the following way:

> Some people say each college should decide whether the work done in a course is up to degree standard. What do you think?

Practically every respondent saw the need for some form of course assessment and accreditation, at least for the present, and at least for most colleges. Some were strongly in favour of current practice of outside assessment and accreditation. One said he considered that it was essential for the

> community to have confidence in these awards, and it is a serious deficiency of the college scene that the Commission on Advanced Education hasn't any teeth to see that there is reasonable uniformity in standards.

Another said simply: 'We need a system for developing standards and applying them'. Still another said he thought there could be public criticism if a college alone decided whether a course was up to degree standard, and added: 'One good thing the VIC has done is to bring outsiders in to look at us'. At the same time, however, a number of respondents disagreed with aspects of the present system of accreditation or said they would prefer alternatives. Similarly, in a sample survey of regional and metropolitan college academics, respondents were also asked about course accreditation. Rather surprisingly, they did not show the strong desire that might have been expected for their colleges to have full control over their academic programme. Respondents were asked to say whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement 'A college itself should decide whether a programme is up to degree standard', or whether they were not sure. Only two out of five respondents said they agreed. Significantly the strongest support for this proportion came from staff in teachers colleges, which at the time of the survey (late 1973) had just entered the CAE sector and had little experience, if any, with course accreditation.

Apart from these considerations, experience from abroad, and particularly from the U.K. and U.S., indicates clearly that accreditation can serve as an instrument in the maintenance and elevation of educational standards and can enable academic staff to be effectively involved in programme development and institutional evaluation. There will be those who regard accreditation as an unwarranted intrusion on academic integrity and as a threat to institutional autonomy. These are arguments long-since lost in other educational settings; in America accreditation 'has grown to the extent that virtually every institution and many programs of study are forced to seek accredited status. Institutions exist, but few thrive without accreditation' (Dickey and Miller, 1972). In the U.K. the benefits of the CNAA system are widely acknowledged. Pratt and Burgess (1974, p.106) argue that the CNAA has been an innovative, rather than a conservative force, and they and other students of higher education place a high value on the benefits to academics of having to explain and defend course proposals before a group of well-informed peers.

Australia now has over one hundred universities and colleges; the status and level of particular degrees and diplomas will be further obscured by the expansion of programmes in further and technical education. Accreditation might provide institutions with the necessary buffer against mediocrity and students with the equally necessary assurance of well-designed and appropriate courses. The competent and committed have little to fear when accreditation is introduced.

(b) Weaknesses

Perhaps the most convenient way to examine weaknesses and possible weaknesses is to look at the situation separately at national, state and institutional levels.

(i) National level

At the national level the main criticisms relate to the composition of the ACAAE, to its powers, to its performance and to its staff resources.

We have already noted that the ACAAE membership comprises nominees of federal and state ministers, and that the bulk of the membership are deeply involved in accreditation at state level. A number of individuals and groups have suggested that the ACAAE would be strengthened considerably by extending its membership to include more members who are independent of state accrediting agencies, and possibly to include other persons bringing particular expertise. We see merit in this view, and consider

it desirable that the Council should be in a position to adopt a more independent role, and to be seen to be acting independently.

Another area of possible weakness relates to the powers of the ACAAE. Many people have argued that its current powers are far too limited and restrictive. Certainly for a national body its powers are by no means considerable, though of course there are historical reasons why the ACAAE has the form it has. In particular, as we have already noted, the Council at present does not have the power to refuse registration of any course and award proposed by a recognised State accrediting agency; its only effective power is the ability to refer back only once any particular proposal.

There has also been criticism of the performance of the Council in areas outside registration and the categorisation of awards. Possibly it could do more to promote public awareness of awards in advanced education, and to promote public discussion of issues relating to accreditation, credentialling, and the length and appropriateness of courses. Perhaps it could be more influential in determining procedures used in accreditation at state level, and to be better informed on the details of particular courses and institutions. But if it is to do all this, it will need substantially more extensive legal powers, and to have its own secretariat, staffed by experienced and well-qualified professionals.

(ii) State level

Perhaps the main weakness at state level relates to the marked differences between states with regard to the structures responsible for accreditation, and to the procedures used. Of course, a substantial degree of this variation may be healthy; uniformity does not necessarily ensure high standards and performance. But it has been argued by many informed individuals and organisations that one result of this particular variation is a lack of uniformity with regard to standards, and that consequently nationally registered courses of the same type and level may differ in quality.

We have already noted differences between state (and territorial) accrediting agencies with regard to their internal structures and how these relate to the reporting of assessment committees. But there are many other differences as well. First, there are differences with respect to whether or not the accrediting agencies have other responsibilities, and if so what these responsibilities are. Most state accrediting agencies are statutory bodies, created primarily to take responsibilities for

co-ordination. In some cases these responsibilities relate solely to advanced education, but in others they include all tertiary education or even in some cases all post-secondary education. This raises an important point: is it possible in particular situations that the interests of co-ordination may conflict with the interests of accreditation? But while most state accrediting agencies are special state co-ordinating authorities, the Australian Territories Accreditation Committee for Advanced Education has no responsibilities at all for co-ordination, while in Tasmania the Council of Advanced Education operates as a co-ordinating authority, accrediting agency and the governing body of that state's sole college of advanced education. Second, in some states assessment committees work from comprehensive guidelines prepared by the secretariat of the agency concerned (e.g. Western Australia), while in other cases members of visiting parties are afforded less positive direction. Third, the composition and remuneration of assessment committees varies. In some instances only members from within the state are appointed; in others, experts in the field are invited from within the state and interstate; and for courses in the A.C.T. overseas accreditors have been used. Certain state authorities perceive accreditation duties as being within the professional responsibilities of panel members and, therefore, no remuneration is offered; others offer daily sitting fees and preparation time remuneration. Fourth, the quality of documentation varies; in one instance an accreditation submission may be only available on the day of the panel's institutional visit; in another extensive documentation may precede a three-day accreditation exercise by some weeks. Fifth, there are significant differences in the quality of communication between accreditation panels and the state authorities or committees to which they recommend. In one instance, the Chairman of the co-ordinating body meets both before and after the technical consultations with the accreditation panel; in another, communication is encouraged only between the accreditation committee chairman and the authority; panel members, in this latter instance, are apprised of the outcomes of their recommendations either by hearsay or by direct enquiry.

A second area of weakness follows from this; there is reason for concern, particularly in some instances, about the briefing, composition and tenure of assessment committees. In his 1975 report on the Australian accreditation system, prepared after a study tour of Australia, Dr Edwin

Kerr, Chief Officer of the CNAA in the U.K., expressed considerable concern about these matters. On the basis of extensive discussions and visits in each state and the A.C.T., Kerr concluded that assessment committees are often inadequately briefed. He reported:

> ... members of the visiting party do not have a clear understanding of the purpose and principles by which they are to carry out their accreditation function or of the basis on which they are to judge courses. As a result there is often confusion within a visiting party and discontent within the college on the operations of the visiting party. Thus, many examples were given to me of members being uncertain whether they were supposed to judge courses on the basis that these should be "different" from those in the universities or whether on the other hand they should judge them on their "similarity" to those in universities. Further members often seemed unclear as to whether they were also to judge it on the basis of a "need for it" and if they were supposed to engage in the latter activity then it was far from clear in all cases on what basis "need" should be judged.
>
> It is also apparent that visiting parties, on account of their inadequate briefing, were in no position to ensure that their decisions and recommendations were consistent with those reached, in similar circumstances, by other visiting parties on other occasions (Kerr, 1975, pp. 10-11).

Kerr also concluded that frequently committees were not appropriately constituted. He saw this problem having a number of aspects:

> ... visiting parties are not large enough to hold discussions with the staff in each area of the proposed course and as a consequence members are often requested to act outside their area of competence; their judgments are not always respected because they are not seen to be made by people of high standing and experience ...; and members are not always experienced in the work of accreditation and so their approach may be felt to be amateurish by the college staff (Kerr, 1975, p.10).

Finally, Kerr was critical of the fact that in many cases assessment committees are ad hoc groupings which come together for the purpose of accrediting a single course, and then might never meet again for any similar purpose.

A third possible weakness at state and territorial level is that there are courses in particular non-university institutions which are comparable to those in CAEs, yet which at present do not come under the accreditation procedures for CAEs. The Conference of Principals of

Colleges of Advanced Education has recommended that any course in a post-secondary institution other than a university and at the same level as an undergraduate diploma course in a CAE should undergo the same accreditation procedures as those which apply to CAE courses.

(iii) Institutional level

At institutional level there are a number of problems. Some of these relate solely to institutional level, but others are linked to both state and national levels. However, for convenience problems in this later category are dealt with here.

In the first place, problems still exist with regard to course titles and the nomenclature of awards. Confusion still exists over nomenclature. The graduate diploma (PG1) category is a case in point. The ACAAE has ruled that '... awards in this category will usually require one year's study full-time or its equivalent, following the satisfactory completion of a category UG1 degree course or, in some cases a UG2 diploma course with or without additional work, or some equivalent qualification' (ACAAE, 1972). The Council also envisages that courses of this kind will be either postgraduate in time and postgraduate in standard or postgraduate in time but not necessarily postgraduate in standard, or some combination of the either/or/or categories. For institutions planning one-year courses, the either/or/or combinations are problematic enough; when combined with the concession '... or some equivalent qualification ...' (above) the possibilities are all the more daunting. On this issue alone, there is urgent need for reappraisal. There are also problems with fields such as architecture, pharmacy, social work and music, where categories of awards do not readily fit. Individual institutions have been subjected to considerable criticism from students and professional associations, who have argued for more relevant titles than some currently used. In some cases, to meet these situations, colleges have employed awards with different designations to those approved for national registration, but this leads to confusion and is not an adequate solution.

Second, accreditation places considerable strain on institutions, particularly the small and new, and those translated recently from being under the control of state government departments. A number of the stronger colleges have developed institutional guidelines to assist academic staff and administrators with the tasks of preparing and

presenting course accreditation documents (e.g. Scutt, 1974). But such help is generally not available in the less mature institutions.

Third, the various stages of the accreditation procedure together take considerable time. Colleges often argue that this time is unnecessarily long, and that because of these delays they often are not able to respond quickly to particular identified community needs. They also claim that in certain situations, universities or TAFE colleges, which do not have to go through similar accreditation procedures, can easily beat them into new areas of study; examples frequently given are pre-school education and child-care.

Fourth, the large, well-established institutions, and particularly those in the DOCIT group, often argue that the accreditation procedure is unfair to them in that it is applied in a similar fashion to all colleges. They propose that once an institution has been judged to have reached a sufficient level of maturity overall, or in specified fields, it should be able to proceed independently. But what these colleges see as a weakness in the system, others view as a strength; one of the common arguments in favour of accreditation made by smaller colleges is that is applies at present equally across the whole CAE system.

Finally, while the accreditation system has undoubtedly worked to protect and promote quality, as a mechanism it has clear limitations. A course proposal may be judged to be of high quality; appropriate staff, facilities and resources may be available; but this does not automatically guarantee high quality outcomes. Possibly the British practice of external examiners would be a useful complement to accreditation.

Policy Suggestions and Options

We have three main suggestions to make. First, since clearly the present system of course accreditation in CAEs has obvious strengths and since it contributes important benefits to individual colleges and their students, to the whole advanced education system, to employers and to various professions, we are firmly of the opinion that it should be continued and improved. Overall the weaknesses we have observed are not fundamental ones; they are matters that can be corrected with effort, good-will and co-operation. Moreover, in the present political and financial climate, with an emphasis on public accountability, it could well be in the interests of colleges to have such a mechanism of peer

review and quality control as the accreditation system. Possibly it would be in the interests of other sectors of higher education to develop similar mechanisms.

Second, we suggest that a comprehensive review of the system at national, state and institutional levels is highly desirable. This point was made at the beginning of the paper. The accreditation system is now well developed, and it would be helpful for all parties concerned if the present arrangements and procedures were reviewed by a competent and independent authority. The ACAAE has conducted its owns reviews and, while no doubt these have been helpful, there is much to be said for a comprehensive review conducted by persons not directly involved in the work of accrediting bodies at state or national levels. Hopefully such a review could tackle a number of major issues which have arisen, and which rightly need investigation by an independent body. We have already noted that the Conference of DOCIT has pressed for the large mature institutions to be allowed to go their own way. One cannot help sympathising with these colleges. Many of them are considerably larger than a number of the universities, yet unlike the smallest or newest university they are required to present all courses for approval and accreditation. On the other hand, if the large institutions were allowed to opt out, how would this affect the whole system? On this matter Kerr (1975, p.9) has commented:

> I was frequently asked in Australia if I thought that major institutions in the U.K. at present associated with the CNAA should soon be free from this association and enabled to award their own degrees without it being necessary for them to have these validated by the CNAA, I was able to reply that I did not think that the system of higher education in the U.K. would move in that direction. Since my return to the U.K. ... I am even more convinced that this response was a correct one. Fundamentally I believe that this is because the institutions do believe the system has been a very great success and because most of them are convinced that arguments which basically amount to a statement "a university does not have to have its courses validated, therefore why should we" is not a good reason for disbanding a system whose success has been so manifestly proven.

Then there are the various suggestions relating to the national accrediting agency - that it should have wider powers, and particularly the power to refuse registration; that it might do more to promote public discussion; that it might exercise a greater influence on state

agencies; that it might even follow CNAA practice and actually award all degrees outside universities. Are these proposals desirable and practical? Would state co-ordinating agencies and state governments, in the current climate of federal-state relations, agree to a much stronger national agency for accreditation? Other matters could well be investigated at the same time. For instance, is there sometimes a conflict within state agencies between co-ordination and accreditation functions? Would it be desirable to follow the U.K. and U.S. practice, whereby co-ordination is not in the hands of government agencies with responsibilities for funding and co-ordination? And apart from these matters relating to accreditation in CAEs, a review might well consider issues related to accreditation and quality control in all sectors of higher education and to the accreditation functions of professional associations.

Third, within the current structure of course accreditation in CAEs, there are a number of areas where improvements could readily be made. Perhaps the most important of these relates to assessment committees - their composition, their tenure, and the briefing provided by agencies to committees. The suggestions made by Kerr appear sensible and desirable. Other areas where improvements are desirable are the time taken by the accreditation process, the remaining problems with regard to course titles and award nomenclatures, a strengthening of the ACAAE by having more members independent of state agencies, and greater help for weak institutions in the preparation and presentation of submissions.

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